



BEST IN THE WORLD

THE UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF
PHIL BROOKS (WWE STAR CM PUNK)

FROM THE **BESTSELLING** PUBLISHER OF

The Undertaker: The Unauthorized Real Life Story
of the WWE's Deadman

BY VINCE RUSSEL

Best in the World: The Unauthorized Biography of Phil Brooks

(WWE Star CM Punk)

By Vince Russel

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Part 1: The Beginning of The Best

Standing backstage at Chicago's All State Arena before a live WWE pay-per-view, Phil Brooks approached the performer's entrance, intensely training his eyes on each forward step as he braced to confront the live crowd of more than 20,000 screaming hometown fans - fans who assembled, it seemed, primarily to see their favorite superstar, CM Punk, in action.

Although the World Wrestling Entertainment roster is rife with performers whose on-camera personas are drastically different from their real-life demeanors, it's nearly impossible to separate CM Punk from Phil Brooks.

Both are legitimately outspoken, intense, and hard-working. In fact, sources close to WWE chairman Vince McMahon reveal that by the WWE chief's own admission, Brooks is one of the most dedicated performers to ever work for McMahon.

Save for Dwayne Johnson, Shawn Michaels, and a handful of other elite ex-WWE champions, there are few talents of the past or present who "get away with talking to Vince like Phil does," a source confesses. "But there's a reason for that. Vince knows Phil doesn't speak from ego or personal want.

He tells the unvarnished truth every time, all the time. And there are very few guys like that in our business. Vince respects that."

According to Brooks, his relationship with McMahon is strong and based on mutual respect, even though it can be strained at times as the nature of the relationship is constantly evolving.

"The relationship [with Vince McMahon] is certainly different and that's something that's always evolving," Brooks said in July 2013 interview. "My relationship with Vince today is different than it was in April. It's something that constantly changes."

But it was Vince McMahon who supported the year-long championship reign that CM Punk enjoyed through all of 2012.

"Vince knows that Phil can carry this company if he has to," a source admits. "John [Cena] is definitely the face of the company, but it's difficult to say if WWE would be what it is if CM Punk wasn't here. He is needed more than most fans and critics realize."

For Phil Brooks, however, the success he has found in the big leagues of sports entertainment was never a sure-thing. From his early days growing up in the Midwest, to his bumpy start on the road to a career in professional wrestling, few outside observers were initially impressed by the youthful presence of Phil Brooks. But his raw talent, intense desire to better himself,

and extreme focus on his professional advancement helped to overcome the uncertainties of his earliest naysayers.

Born Phillip Jack Brooks on October 26, 1978, CM Punk earned the distinction of being one of the longest-reigning WWE Champions in history with a 434 day title reign. It began on the 20th of November, 2011 and ended on the 27th of January, 2013.

Brooks' other notable titles include the ROH World Championship, the ECW Championship, the World Heavyweight Championship (three times), the World Tag Team Championship, and WWE Intercontinental Championship.

What has never been recognized on WWE programming, however, is that CM Punk earned the prestigious WWE Triple Crown in record time - just over two hundred days.

Starting out as an independent wrestler, Brooks quickly gained traction on the Ring of Honor circuit. Until 2005, Punk worked with ROH as a trainer for their wrestling school, and wrestled for their events. In 2005, he was signed to WWE, where he quickly began to climb the ranks of a talent pool desperately in need of promising young talent. What made the Punk likeness especially unique is his straight-edge “gimmick.”

For Brooks, however, it's not a gimmick at all. Rather, it's a philosophy that Phillip Brooks shares with CM Punk. Straight-edge is a subculture in hardcore punk (from where his name is derived). In this subculture, followers do not use alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. Many adherents also refrain from sexual promiscuity, and follow a vegetarian diet.

The origin of his name dates back to his earliest foray into professional wrestling - a backyard ring called the Lunatic Wrestling Federation, started with his brother.

Young Phil and his tag team partner were called the Chick Magnets, shortened to CM Punk for Brooks and CM Venom for his partner. While the original purpose of the ring was for fun only, Phil saw how it could grow into a professional career. His brother, however, allegedly embezzled money from the wrestling ring, ultimately leading the demise of the federation and their relationship.

Phil reportedly has not spoken with his brother since the embezzlement was uncovered.

Becoming more of a loner and tightening the circle of individuals with whom he could confidently place his trust, Phil Brooks soon moved on the “Steel Dominion” wrestling school in Chicago, where his mentors included Ace Steel, Danny Dominion, and Kevin Quinn.

The connections made at this school and the training provided would later propel Brooks toward stardom. It was while wrestling for Steel Domain that he met one of his best friends, Scott Colton—Colt Cabana. Along with their other friends, fellow graduates from the Steel Dominion School, he and Colt Cabana formed a wrestling alliance called the Gold Bond Mafia.

"I don't know how entertaining we are when we hang out," Brooks would reveal years later about his immensely close relationship with Cabana.

"We're literally just sitting on my couch arguing. 'Want to go to the gym?'

'Yeah, I don't want to go to your gym.' 'Well, I don't want to go to your gym.' The gym I go to in Chicago, people are told not to speak to me.

[Laughs.] It's a long story, I know it's some crazy Axl Rose stuff. But when I go to a gym, it drives me crazy -- sometimes I

can't go to a gym because people are constantly bothering me, mid-workout, they're tapping me on the shoulder. I just want to throw people out of a third-story window."

For the next five years, Brooks worked the Ring of Honor and Independent Wrestling Association Mid-South, where he rose to the top of his roster.

Twice he won the IWA Mid-South Light Heavyweight Championship, and the Heavyweight Championship five times. The feuds and friendships created during this time followed him into his professional career with the WWE. He beat out A.J. Styles, Colt Cabana and Eddie Guerrero for his

championship titles, all of whom were growing in fame and popularity. He came to the Ring of Honor as a face but often thrived as the heel, especially when working with Raven. This also began his involvement with no-rules matches, where weapons were allowed into the ring. The contrast between their two personalities, Punk being a straight-edge, and Raven being a serial rule-breaker, emerged as a compelling story and feud that lasted most of 2003.

Involvement with both the Ring of Honor and Raven's alliance, The Gathering, afforded him the opportunity to fight and win the ROH Tag Team Championship twice (with the help of his friend, Colt Cabana). It was also around this same time that he became the head trainer of ROH's school.

But as his knowledge of the business and the sport of professional wrestling deepened, Brooks began questioning the safety of the Total Nonstop Action shows he was being asked to help with. One of his fellow wrestlers, Teddy Hart, reportedly performed a few unplanned stunts, which could have seriously hurt some of the other wrestlers.

Though, according to TNA officials, the reason Brooks was no longer asked to wrestle for them had to do with a discontinuation of his storyline, it also

seemed to have something do with his disagreements about their safety practices.

Sources close to WWE admit that Brooks is one of the "safest" guys in the ring, meaning he goes above and beyond the call of duty to protect his fellow wrestlers. Brooks has an exceptional reputation behind the scenes as a wrestler who puts his opponent first at all times. He takes ample and significant risks with his own body. *His* body. Nobody else's. This is one of the biggest reasons the boys in the back respect Brooks' in-ring work ethics. Even when compelled to work with individuals he shares less than a warm friendship with, Brooks is said to be "professional at all times."

After leaving both TNA wrestling and Ring of Honor, Brooks hit the big time, a destiny he was poised to reach, when he finally signed by WWE. In September 2005, he was assigned to Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW), a WWE developmental territory.

Unfortunately for the promising young talent, Brooks ruptured his eardrum and broke his nose during his first televised match.

He would be sidelined for two months. But upon his return, Phil Brooks illustrated his resilience with stunning success, fighting and winning against Ken Doane to become the Ohio Valley Wrestling Television Champion. This

match started a feud between CM Punk and Brent Albright, as Punk took Albright's place in the match against Doane.

Through a series of fights, they became both team members and enemies as was most advantageous for their careers, sometimes working together, and sometimes knocking each other out in order for a shot at the championship.

Brooks, however, perpetually came out on top, until Albright teamed with the Spirit Squad, who finally beat the future Straight Edge superstar.

When the defender of the OVW Heavyweight Championship dropped out in 2006, the circuit held a competition to find a replacement. Brooks met his old rival Albright at the finals. As part of their story line, Brooks was the face, and Albright was the heel, reportedly even threatening Brooks' girlfriend at the time, Maria Kanellis. Their inevitable face-off left Brooks the champion. And he would go on to defend his championship against many challengers.

Soon, Brooks partnered with Seth Skyfire, a one-time opponent, in order to win the OVW Southern Tag Team Championship. However, they quickly lost the titles to Deuce Shade and Cliff Compton, reportedly because both Brooks and Skyfire were injured during the match. This loss sparked a feud between the two, though they wrestled together again during a rematch for

the tag team championship. During this match, Brooks purposefully tagged in an injured Skyfire so that they would lose. A fight to settle the growing feud was scheduled, but when Skyfire was hurt in a street fight, he was replaced. Following Brooks' defeat in that match, he moved over to WWE full time.

And he never looked back.

Part 2: Truth to Power

Initially a regular on WWE's ECW brand in 2006, Phil Brooks was very candid about his straight-edge lifestyle, and began incorporating more styles of wrestling into his repertoire.

For the next year, he went undefeated in Extreme Championship Wrestling and capitalized beautifully of his feud with wrestler Mike Knox. His winning streak ended when he entered the ECW World Championship tournament and was quickly eliminated by Rob Van Dam.

The feuds and winning streaks continued in pay-per-view matches and single competitions, where Brooks continued to excel, recording critical wins over the likes of Kenny Dykstra and Booker T, both of whom held titles at the time. However, during WrestleMania 23, he was unsuccessful in his first Money in The Bank ladder match, losing to Mr. Kennedy.

Having impressed WWE's top decision makers, a slow but steady push for CM Punk was soon planned.

On the April 10, 2007 episode of ECW on Sci Fi, Punk played the role of both villain and hero during a four on four elimination match, entering as a member of the heel alliance New Breed, and leaving as a hero and a

member of the crowd-favorite ECW Originals. In subsequent matches, Punk continued to fight against the New Breed Alliance. He also again had the chance to wrestle for the ECW Championship. But he was again defeated, this time in the last round of the tournament by Johnny Nitro.

It wasn't long before the seat was vacated and CM Punk once again had the opportunity to fight for the championship. This time he won, holding the title a few months until Chavo Guerrero challenged and beat him.

In 2008, Punk was drafted to WWE's flagship television brand, Raw, and quickly defeated Edge for the title of World Heavyweight Champion, which he held for a solid three months before giving it up to Chris Jericho. While a member of the WWE Raw family, CM Punk would win two "Money in the Bank" briefcases, although he failed to regain his title from Jericho.

It was not until early 2009 that he once again gained the World Heavyweight Championship, and - in the process - also captured the prestigious Triple Crown. On March 9th, during an episode of Raw, Bradshaw Layfield reclaimed the Heavyweight title. And Punk wouldn't have another crack at his former crown until he cashed in the Money in the Bank briefcase for a shot at the championship, then held by Jeff Hardy. With his win, he turned heel, claiming "moral superiority" over Hardy because Punk followed a straight-edge lifestyle and Hardy did not. This

began their year-long feud. During this time, the title changed hands many times, but ultimately it was Punk who came out on top.

So impressive to upper management was Punk during this period that the decision was made to have The Undertaker help further elevate this rising star's reputation.

Punk was tapped to defend his title against the Deadman, and he did so successfully.

Officially established as a main event-caliber talent – one proficient at drawing heat from a crowd when doing so was necessary - Brooks began to masterfully play the role of villain once again during a late 2009 episode of WWE SmackDown.

CM Punk recruited Luke Gallows to his straight-edge lifestyle and became a de facto Jesus of sports entertainment. Plants in the audience took the straight-edge pledge and then were “never seen again.” Punk’s followers from the WWE ranks became known as the Straight Edge Society. He soon played up his messianic image by growing his hair out and sporting a beard as well as “preaching” during matches.

This character development led to a feud between the Straight Edge alliance and Rey Mysterio, eventually resulting in the shaving of Punk’s head when

he lost a match at WrestleMania 26.

The Jesus-persona continued, however, as he often seemed to perform healings in the ring, but when he was sent back to Raw, WWE executives determined that heavy emphasis on Straight Edge was detracting from the man himself. And so after brief runs in several more alliances - including Nexus - CM Punk was established as a one man band. And his rise continued even more meteoric than the past.

Early in 2011, the WWE had a bold idea. With Phil Brooks already well-known behind the scenes as a man upon whom a "gimmick" couldn't be imposed, the real-life truth teller and pipe-bomb dropper was encouraged to be more of "himself on camera.

"Programming had become stale to a degree," a WWE source admits.

"There was talk of the whole company riding on John Cena's back. But once you realize that half of the WWE Universe doesn't like John, you've got a problem. You need an anti-hero for this hero - or 'Super Cena' - as his critics grew fond of saying."

But perhaps no one more than Triple H deserves credit for allowing CM Punk to go off - and stay off - the rails, much to the delight of WWE fans who were thirsty for more truth from WWE programming.

Throughout 2011, for an undetermined but substantial number of live broadcasts of WWE Monday Night Raw, Vince McMahon was not backstage to run the show, per the tradition that dates back to the program's inception and debut in January of 1993 on the USA Network.

In McMahon's place for each of those absences was Paul Levesque - Triple H - who effectively ran the show and filled the shoes of his father-in-law. With Levesque only wrestling a few matches throughout the entire year, McMahon reportedly used the opportunity to "train" Levesque in the backstage day-to-day operations of the business. Although Levesque was already intimately acquainted with the general routine, running the show is a lot different than just appearing on it.

It was crystal clear in the spring of 2011 on WWE programming that Triple H had more power than ever behind the scenes. And McMahon himself was ready to go public with a real-life forthcoming "Game changer."

Although the storyline was largely fabricated for dramatic effect in carrying out one of the program's angles at the time, there were hidden truths at play during the July 18, 2011 episode of Monday Night Raw.

During the show, Triple H returned on behalf of WWE's board of directors to effectively remove his father-in-law Vince McMahon as the head of the company.

This segment was followed by the announcement on Raw that Levesque had been assigned to take over as Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the WWE (a role Triple H doesn't really occupy off camera).

This occasion marked the first time in WWE history that the company's programming reflected the real-life reality that Triple H is outwardly poised to one day run Vince McMahon's company, presumably alongside his wife Stephanie McMahon.

Just weeks earlier, CM Punk - authorized by Triple H and McMahon to do so but without a script from the writers - cut a controversial promo on Raw that cemented his role as a talent who can't be contained from speaking his mind.

"I'd like to think that maybe this company will be better after Vince McMahon is dead," Punk said live on Raw. "But the fact is, it's going to be taken over by his idiotic daughter and his doofus son-in-law and the rest of his stupid family."

With those words spoken, an electric current was sent through the WWE Universe, re-energizing fans with a dose of real-life reality that the company's programming had lacked for far too long.

Having become the hottest draw in WWE, CM Punk was poised for a showdown with WWE Champion John Cena. Vowing to leave the company

as the expiration of his contract, CM Punk was scheduled to face off against Cena at July 2011's "Money in the Bank" pay-per-view.

Conveniently, the match was set to commence fewer than 24 hours before CM Punk's contract was set to expire. He would go on to pin WWE Champion John Cena in his hometown of Chicago, Illinois, gaining the title and bolting the company with it.

To the outside world, Phil Brooks - as CM Punk - had become the modern-day Steve Austin - an on-camera thorn in the side of Vince McMahon and a rabble-rouser who only says and does what he feels. Even as a heel, CM Punk was arguably still the biggest face in WWE.

After leaving WWE, Brooks appeared at some inter-circuit fights, CM Punk eventually returned to Raw, creating more controversy with each passing week.

By the fall of 2011, CM Punk was WWE champion and sounding off on a new in-ring irritant - this time, we're told - without the consent of WWE executives.

Purportedly angering Vince McMahon, during an interview with the New York Daily News, Phil Brooks suggested that Dwayne Johnson - The Rock - has a "Hollywood megastar" ego and it's annoying to the roster.

“You know, the thing about that is, he’s not around,” Brooks candidly admitted. “It doesn’t help morale when the guy goes right from his limo to the dressing room to the dressing room to the ring. He’s very bourgeois Hollywood.”

Brooks professed his view that he doesn’t believe The Rock is back to help the younger superstars.

He thinks Johnson is only back for a payday, to further his Hollywood career, and to make WrestleMania 28 a success.

“He came back; he did WWE Raw after that. He said he was never gonna leave. And the next time we saw him is a month later,” Brooks said. “Yeah, it does bother me. A little hello would have been nice. He could have run by with his own entourage.”

“According to Punk,” the New York Post article adds, “The Rock has made little effort to interact with the rest of WWE – and it’s caused a lot of resentment in the WWE locker room. But when asked if Rock was a diva, Punk said that would be an insult to WWE’s Divas.”

“I can’t say that,” Brooks insists. “At least the WWE Divas say hi to me in the halls. “In October of 2011, after much internal deliberation, Vince McMahon and company agreed that The Rock would be advertised for

November 20, 2011 at the 25th anniversary of the Survivor Series in New York City at Madison Square Garden.

Even though it wasn't clear to the public if The Rock would wrestle at the Survivor Series at the time tickets first went on sale (although this plan was already in place at WWE), the event sold out in a matter of minutes.

And The Rock was quick to hop on Twitter and broadcast the achievement through every available social media channel – a move that once again drew criticisms from Phil Brooks.

"I think it's great," Brooks said in response to the sold-out Garden. "Bottom line is it's a business. If Rock is going to put asses in seats then yay for us. There are a lot of misconceptions about how I feel about it. Obviously people love asking me because they know they're going to get the 100% truth. He comes back and he says that he's never going to leave again and then he doesn't come back for months. Yes, he's doing Survivor Series and, yes, it sold out in a half hour. Let's be honest. It's the Garden and it's the 25th anniversary of Survivor Series. The show was going to sell out but I get the bragging. 'Oh, it sold out in a half hour.' I sold out the Garden - me and JBL in a cage match so I have that distinction. I can say that I sold out Madison Square Garden, no matter how ridiculous it sounds. The problem I have with Dwayne is that he came back, he said he's never leaving again

and I don't appreciate all this, 'Oh, the WrestleMania buy rate was up. Oh, it's because of Dwayne.' Was it? Or was it because of me and Randy Orton or was it because of Miz and John Cena? That's unfortunately something that you can't really ever figure out. A lot of people like to live and die by the ratings. It's a big news story that he came back, absolutely. I think he even tweeted me one time saying something like, 'The Rock in the main event makes more money than CM Punk could in a lifetime,' which is obviously a fallacy. That ultimately is where I have the problem with Dwayne. He lives in a fantasy world. No matter if I like or hate whoever I'm working with, I say, 'hello,' to them. I fraternize with them. It's a brotherhood backstage. I'm with these people more than I'm with my little sisters and my family. I just don't appreciate going from limo to dressing room, from dressing room to the ring and not saying 'hi' to any of the boys. That's what he does. I was just at a Guns N' Roses show backstage in Chicago and that's exactly what Axl Rose does and Axl's a lot cooler than Dwayne. Part of me gets it but for anybody who wants to say I have a bad attitude or a chip on my shoulder about it - absolutely. I think anybody should. There are guys in that locker room that bust their ass and there are guys that should be in the main event at WrestleMania. Eventually it will happen for everybody as long as you're passionate about it. I'm passionate about. Yeah, it pisses me off."

As the fall and winter months of 2011 and early 2012 progressed, CM Punk's verbal jabs toward The Rock grew increasingly pettier.

On December 6, 2011, shortly after The Rock announced that his new "Boots To Asses" t-shirt was the bestselling t-shirt sold by WWE, CM Punk went on Twitter to dispute the claim.

"The Rock comes up with another lie. Claiming his shirt is the most sold in WWE. We all know it's the @CMPunk T-Shirt, that's most sold," Punk re-tweeted from one of his adoring followers.

Commenting in the December issue of WWE Magazine, The Rock referenced the two "insecure and jealous" superstar that some say CM Punk turned out to be.

"Some guys in the locker room aren't too happy with your return," the publication's reporter said to The Rock. "Do you feel you need to earn their respect, or do you feel they need to earn your respect?"

"Of course," The Rock replied, "a few guys have been very vocal about their unhappiness with me coming back. It doesn't bother me at all. It just proves that they lack perspective. Returning to WWE is an incredible opportunity for me. But much bigger than me, it's an incredible opportunity for the business and, at the end of the day, all we want to do is elevate WWE to new heights never seen before and make the fans happy. For

example, when Hulk Hogan returned to WWE, I loved it, because I knew it was going to be incredible for the business. We made history together and made millions and millions of fans happy. Always remember that the ones who were vocal and disapproving about me coming back—and we all know who the two are—are the ones who are most insecure and jealous. Maybe one day they'll smarten up and understand the greater perspective.”

Initially, WWE had not planned to mix CM Punk with The Rock. Why? According to the rumor mill, Dwayne Johnson really didn't care much for Brooks personally or publicly. But the heat between the Punk and The Rock grew so intense that Johnson eventually agreed to play ball. And in January 2013, Johnson snapped Punk's year-long title reign at Royal Rumble.

"Believe me," a source says, "Phil would have preferred to lose that title to Michael Cole rather than Dwayne Johnson. But he did what was good for the company without sacrificing his 'code.'" Brooks' "code" involves always letting his feelings be known. And Brooks made it clear for well over a year before he faced off against The Rock that he didn't like him or how he "uses" WWE for professional and personal gain.

Although Phil Brooks enjoyed huge success between 2011-2013, his achievements took a heavy toll.

While respected by all, he was reportedly disliked by many in the WWE locker room. Handsomely compensated for saying things on camera that no one could else could get away with, Brooks had become a polarizing figure.

"When he was first getting started in this business," a source said, "Phil had a small circle of people he liked and trusted. He's friendly still with most, but I think his circle has only gotten smaller. He's mostly a loner. And his success has brought out even more of that. You know, I don't think anyone can actually say anything bad about Phil. He hasn't hurt anyone. He's honest - even if you don't like what he has to say. He deals with everyone fairly.

And no can say he's crossed them, I don't think. So it's just a personality thing. Phil's a good guy. But he's so damn intense and outspoken, it's hard to have a lot of friends that way."

Part 3: 'Phil'osophy: What Drives CM Punk

In the mainstream media, professional wrestling comes with a certain unfortunate stigma. For those who are involved in the sport - from viewers to the wrestlers themselves - it is an exciting thrill-ride. It's a sport, but mostly it's a story - a constantly evolving story.

For those not enamored of this weekly athletic soap opera, it seems like a rinse-and-repeat cycle, the same storylines over and over again, the same breaking and forming of alliances and matches that pretty much end predictably.

But the dynamics of WWE changed - perhaps forever in the modern era - when WWE executives - namely Triple H and Vince McMahon - unleashed Phil Brooks and his unquenchable thirst for the truth behind this "fake sport."

The difference between Cena and Punk were dramatic.

CM Punk is all attitude, tattoos and punk rock, without any of the drug, alcohol, or promiscuous sex. For the last couple of years, John Cena had been World Wrestling Entertainment's golden boy, with his PG antics and handsome, all-American face. While Cena and Punk both seem to be a

departure from the normal smack-talking, growling beats of the wrestling ring, it's Punk that captures the imagination of the WWE Universe more than Cena.

CM Punk, simply put, is more interesting and a better wrestler. And it continues to confound the WWE superstar why this interest hasn't translated into top company success.

To be sure, CM Punk is one of the WWE's greatest talents. But even amidst his title reign, CM Punk still played second - maybe third - fiddle to Cena and The Rock.

Before his storyline departure from WWE in July 2011, Punk laid out the company's worst attributes, railing against the managers and owners in his now infamous "electrifying" pipe bomb speech.

But after a short vacation, he was back again, leading most people to believe that this was an extension of his "straight-edge" storyline, not his personal feelings. However, as he revealed in a GQ interview in 2011, the majority of the intense fiery malice expressed in the speech might have been part of the storyline, but the feelings behind the speech were indeed, his own.

In response to an question about Punk's claims that his storyline has made WWE more relevant to the mainstream (that is, the media only cares about

what's going on in the WWE when he's involved or when someone dies) he said, "I think pro wrestling—for some reason, our company doesn't like to call it that, but that's what it is, so that's what I call it—it doesn't seem to get a lot of mainstream attention until somebody dies. There's a negative connotation to that, but Randy Savage just passed away of natural causes. The poor guy was driving his car, and he had a heart attack. I think that was the last time we got any mainstream attention. And then all eyes are on the program, to see whether they're going to do a memorial. Are they going to forget about this guy? Are they going to pretend he didn't contribute to their product? It's not just the negative stuff with stupid wrestlers dying in stupid ways. Savage was all over ESPN. Local news reported it. It was a big news story. They don't report what happens on every other Monday Night Raw.' "

He continues, explaining why, "Pro wrestling has always been ingrained into American culture. It was one of the first things that was ever on television, so everybody watched it. Countless people tell me, I got into wrestling because my grandfather watched it."

"It was always there," he said. "No matter how much people want to pretend that they're embarrassed by it, that they don't watch it, everybody knows about it. It's truly, I believe, one of the only art forms that America has actually given to the world, besides jazz and comic books.

The media, no offense, likes to latch onto negative stuff. They're not going

to report that—there's no truth to this story; I'm just using it as an example—that John Cena and his wife just had an eight-pound baby. But you'd better believe that if somebody dies, they're going to report it.”

Answering a question about why his storyline is so compelling and why there aren't more storylines like his in the sport, Brooks asserts that it's a great question but one for which he has no answer.

“If it happened more often,” he says, “it wouldn't be as special, right? I hear a lot of people compare what I did three weeks ago to Stone Cold Steve Austin. Everyone's just waiting for that next polarizing character. I think that's why this worked. I've been saying I'm that guy for five years.

Different people are afforded different opportunities. I've been given some awesome opportunities, and I feel that I've always knocked them out of the park. But I've always been scaled back after that. This time, the genesis of it is that I'm leaving. I'm done. I'm tired. ‘What are they going to do, fire me?’ That's been my attitude for months and months now. That finally resonated through the television screen. And that's something that everyone in this economic world can 100% relate to.”

“I do a lot of weird little things like that because people talk about it. I don't think it's any secret; I think the biggest match any wrestling company can do right now is CM Punk vs. Stone Cold Steve Austin,” he admits. “I've

thought that since I was 15. I'm straight edge. I don't drink. I don't do drugs. I don't smoke. And that is the perfect protagonist or antagonist to Stone Cold Steve Austin, depending on how you want to spin it. It writes itself. You would have to try really, really hard to [expletive] that one up. The idea of being on television is to wear your T-shirt so people see it and maybe buy it. I had gone out previously in the night and wrestled. You throw your T-shirt on the ground, and I don't know what the hell happens to it after that. I came to the back, and I was looking for another T-shirt. I sent somebody to go and get one, and they came back with a XXL. I was like, 'I'm going to be swimming in this thing.' And it's always creepy when you're wearing wrestling trunks with a shirt because it doesn't look like you're wearing any pants. I had a Stone Cold Steve Austin shirt in my bag, and it fit me. I chuckled to myself and put it on. Am I planting seeds? I don't know. I can't guarantee to anybody that that match is going to happen. Do I want it to happen? Absolutely.”

In June 2013, a purportedly top secret meeting at WWE headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut took place to discuss "epic" match scenarios for the milestone WrestleMania 30. Few scenarios were reportedly discussed that didn't involve "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and CM Punk.

After 3 consecutive WrestleMania appearances by The Rock, Steve Austin - who has failed to emulate The Rock big screen film success - was said to be "more motivated than any other time in the last ten years" to get back in the ring for one more tour of duty.

“For years, Austin has been asked time and time again if he would ever return to the ring, and he almost always provided the same answer about moving on from wrestling to pursue a career in acting,” says Adam Pearson of The Bleacher Report. “Finally, it seems as though Stone Cold is getting the itch again.

During a 2011 interview with G4's "Attack of the Show," WWE Hall of Famer Steve Austin said for the first time since his retirement that CM Punk is “the hottest thing in the business right now,” and if he were to step in the ring one last time "that would be the way to go."

The word around WWE is that Vince McMahon actually reached out to “Stone Cold” Steve Austin shortly after The Rock vs. John Cena was announced for WrestleMania 28. Rumor has it that McMahon received a verbal commitment from Austin that he would, indeed, wrestle one last match against Punk if the company was ever “in dire straits” going into the following year’s WrestleMania.

“The build for a WrestleMania match between CM Punk and ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin has unofficially started,” The Chicago Sun-Times reported August 28, 2011. “On Thursday, the two took to Twitter to begin the verbal sparring. Austin was discussing beer, of all things, with Zack Ryder when Punk replied that beer is poison, setting off the back-and-forth.”

“Austin is on record as saying he wants one more match and that Punk would be the one to get him to lace up the boots again,” the report adds.

“But Austin, 46, who retired in 2003, wouldn’t come back for a match without a great angle. Punk is good enough on the mic and is smart enough that these two could start a feud... and have the fans begging for the match...”

The only reason we haven't see the match yet is because Vince McMahon would not want to overload the WrestleMania 28 and 29 cards. That is, The Rock and John Cena stayed healthy enough to carry out their matches at back-to-back WrestleManias. McMahon wants Austin and Punk to have their own majority chunk of the spotlight at a major pay-per-view that will be solely focused on their encounter. At the end of the day, McMahon allegedly thinks, the “straight edge superstar” mixing it up with the beer-drinking SOB could actually prove an even bigger and more entertaining spectacle than The Rock vs. John Cena.

But why? Because WWE fans think of Austin and Punk as real men in a fake sport. That is, the outcome of WWE matches are pre-determined. But the words that emanate from Punk and Austin aren't contrived. They're real, intense, and perpetually controversial. The mic-war alone would make Austin vs. Punk an instant-classic.

When prodded about how much of his wrestling character is storyline, Punk readily admits that nothing is just for show.

"How much is real?" he asks, repeating the question. "That's 100% real.

That's not to say that there are still negotiations. It's not like I'm leaving and they're like, 'Good. Go [expletive] yourself.' I think that's why this whole thing works. I'm not doing my job if people are like, 'What you do is fake.' And literally people on the street are confused, generally, for the first time. That's a great thing. The funny part about it is that you're going to have your staunchest critic who says that it's all scripted. It's not! Dusty Rhodes told me a long time ago that the best promos come from the heart. You watch anybody who's ever cut a meaningful promo, and it means something to them. Everything I've said isn't somebody else's words that they put on paper. They tend to hand me things like, 'Here, say this,' and I'm not saying any of it. If I went out there and laid an egg, if what I did was boring TV and nobody cared and nobody was talking about it, somebody would probably be pissed off. But I went out there and seemingly turned the

place on its ear, and I have yet to hear one negative thing about any of it. I don't really think Vince McMahon cares. The bottom line is making money. I'd like to think that that's what I did. Whether it's real or not is almost irrelevant, but I think people can see through it and realize that yeah, this guy's pissed off, this guy's fed up. They can relate to that.”

And that, ultimately, is what seems to be the real essence of CM Punk. While some of his words are premeditated, he is proficient at channeling his true self - Phil Brooks - into the CM Punk character. And they are virtually undistinguishable on television because they are equally as undistinguishable behind off camera.

Asked about whether or not he is surprised by people’s reactions to his character and success, Brooks said, “Yeah. I'd like to go out there and do that all the time, but that's just not the case. So to actually strike that nerve is tremendous. Right after that night in Vegas, we hit the ground running. We flew to Australia the next day, and that's a 15-hour flight, so that's 15 hours of everybody talking about what I did. And when I landed in Australia, I wasn't really turning my phone on because of the roaming charges. People started emailing me and texting me. Jim Rome wants me on his show, and all these ESPN people are talking about it. Bill Simmons is writing about it.

I wasn't on the nine o'clock news or anything like that, but it seems like I made it socially relevant for the first time in a very long time.”

One of Punk’s major pet peeves with professional wrestling, not just with the WWE, but with all the professional wrestling franchises he’s been a part of, is how they are run and how they treat their talent. Without question, Brooks would have never found lasting success in the WWE if the company had been resistant to hearing his criticisms and complaints.

To the WWE's credit, the organization empowered CM Punk to succeed largely by - eventually - staying out of his way.

“A lot of the people who are in charge—and this isn't a negative thing—are old," Brooks says. They have a wealth of experience, yes, but there's no youth that's involved in anything. The youngest people there are all performers. I don't envy their job, trying to get inside somebody's head and figure out who they are and what their character is. It's a nerve-racking thing when you first get there. If you're like me, this was your dream job; you worked 13 years to get to where you are.

The normal course of action is mouth shut, eyes and ears open, not stepping on toes.

“But that's how you get ahead," he explains. "A squeaky wheel gets the grease. If something sucks, I've always been completely vocal about it, and

I've been punished many, many times because of that. But I don't think I'd be in the spot I'm in right now if I wasn't me. I've always just been me. I don't think we should be looking externally for talent; there's plenty of guys and girls in house that are super-talented that we don't do enough with. A guy like Evan Bourne, who's a fantastic high-flyer, does the most fantastic stuff on the roster. I could go on: Kofi Kingston, Dolph Ziggler, Beth Phoenix. There's Nattie Neidhart, Tyson Kidd. Tyson Kidd is a fantastic wrestler, maybe not the greatest promo. So let's help him. Let's teach him to get better instead of signing someone from Europe who failed at Euro football. I could talk about this forever. Part of it is that there's no territories; there's no place for people to learn. And the places that people can learn aren't the best, and they're completely looked down upon. Like independent wrestling. It's easy to shit on people from a great height, but it's another thing to pull them aside and try to impart knowledge. And I've been on the other side of the coin where I try to help somebody out and they blow me off like they know everything.”

Part 4: Looking Toward Legacy

In March of 2013, days after the public learned that CM Punk would face The Undertaker at WrestleMania 29, Mark Calaway - The Undertaker - reportedly called Vince McMahon.

It is suspected that Calaway wanted the streak to end... again. Of course, wasn't the first time, however, that The Undertaker told WWE management how he feels about the streak.

For a wrestler known as the "Deadman" in the WWE Universe, Calaway doesn't fit the billing, especially as his chief concern today remains giving new life to future careers.

"Mark cares deeply about the business today, yesterday, and tomorrow," a source reveals. "His loyalty runs deep - to his company second and to the guys in the back first. He is loyal to the core. That's why you never heard about him jumping ship to WCW during the WWE's rough patches when everyone and their mother was bailing. He stuck it out. He was one of the few."

For Calaway, some inside the WWE have implied, his greatest contribution to the future of the business may be allowing an up and coming superstar to

snap his undefeated streak at WrestleMania - something Calaway reportedly wants to see happen before he retires.

"I don't think he wants the streak to live on," one former wrestler admits.

"He has a long history of trying to end it. People don't know this, generally, but if Mark thinks giving up the streak will help elevate the next big star, he'll do it without thinking twice. It's McMahon who isn't so willing to give it up. At least not yet."

According to former WWE champion and current TNA wrestler Kurt Angle, The Undertaker has been willing to lose at WrestleMania for at least ten years.

In a 2010 interview with The Sun, Angle admits that Calaway wanted him to end his fabled streak in 2001 at WrestleMania 22.

"The person who wanted to do it was Undertaker himself," Angle candidly reveals. "I was flattered, for him to go to Vince McMahon and pitch it. Undertaker at that point never had a five-star WrestleMania moment match. He figured that the only one he could do it with was me, at the time. Thank God a couple of years later he had Shawn Michaels, and it worked. But Undertaker really wanted to have that match, he asked Vince to push our match back from No Way Out to WrestleMania and, since I was champion they wanted me to keep the title, Undertaker was willing to take the loss."

“To me that meant a lot because Undertaker had a lot of respect for me,” Angle says. “And I had more respect for him than he did for me.”

Calaway, however, had the same degree of respect for CM Punk.

Although the legendary grappler from Death Valley hasn't spoken on record about the issue, locker room sources say The Undertaker views Phil Brooks as an indispensable asset to the WWE's future.

But, alas, McMahon determined that Punk was already "over" with fans and didn't need the streak to end for his betterment. Indeed, CM Punk's superstar status was already solidified. And so the streak was preserved for another day.

Though, in CM Punk's loss to Undertaker at WrestleMania 29, Phil Brooks' own career took a monumental leap forward. Never again, many WWE allegedly believe, will CM Punk be a mid-card pay-per-view attraction. He is now a headliner. And given how little time we may have left with the Strait Edge superstar, it's unlikely the WWE will waste any opportunity to give CM Punk a richly deserved spotlight.

It's no secret that Phil Books wants to be just like Ric Flair... if Ric had stopped wrestling in the mid 90's when his prime had finally passed.

"Phil isn't a guy who wants to work one day beyond the point where his best matches are behind him," a WWE source confesses. "He care about his

body of work too much to let any inability to let go tarnish it. He has a great deal of respect for guys like Flair and even Hogan, but he won't stay past his best days for money, fame, or ego. When he hangs up his boots, he's done. There won't be any comeback matches. When he punches out, we won't see him again in the ring."

By the wrestler's own admission, CM Punk's final match may come in 2015 - likely at WrestleMania. Individuals working behind the scenes at WWE reveal that Brooks was powerfully moved by Adam Copeland's retirement, which came abruptly after his match at WrestleMania 27. When Edge bowed out after 'Mania, ending his hall of fame-worthy career on the grandest stage, Brooks reportedly began telling friends that 2015 would be the year of his retirement.

"Waiting until I get home to watch @walkingdead_amc So around 2015. CM Punk (@CMPunk) tweeted on October 15, 2012.

Brooks was referring to the AMC hit series Walking Dead. But the tweet raised instant controversy with the suggestion that he won't have time to watch and enjoy the series for two more years. By then, he'll have more free time in retirement.

Fans soon began pelting Brooks with tweets in reply, questioning the original provocative comment.

“@CMPunk you just started a rumor that you're retiring in 2015,” one fan tweeted.

"Ain't a rumor if It's true," was Brooks' public response.

According to Bleacher Report columnist Colin I. McAndrew, it may seem "too soon" for Brooks to hang up his tights in 2015, but by that time, Phil Brooks would be 37 years old with two solid decades behind him in the wrestling business.

If the goal is to go out on top, that may be the time to do just that.

"If Punk does retire," McAndrew says, "he will be part of an elite group. Only a handful of wrestlers under 40 have controlled their own fate and retired on their own terms. Most are forced out due to injury, while others fade into obscurity and wrestle their days away in the Indys."

For now, Brooks remains healthy, focused, and perhaps in the best shape of his professional career.

Unlike years past, when Brooks was purportedly most concerned with making a name for himself, the WWE superstar knows he's arrived. And with the realization comes a shift in focus. Now, Phil Brooks is thinking about his legacy. He wants his remaining years inside of a WWE ring to be fruitful and memorable.

Indeed, he wants to build upon a legacy he is already immensely proud of, by his own admission.

“I will always say that my proudest moment was just being C.M. Punk,” Brooks confesses. “When I started wrestling in the backyard with my buddies, I was C.M. Punk. When we didn't know anything about the wrestling business and decided that we needed to run shows because we were awesome, when we built a wooden ring and eventually bought a ring and started running shows—these untrained goofballs that we all were—I was obsessed with being the best wrestler. I think it's an awesome story, that I've been C.M. Punk since I was 15, and that I went from rolling around in the backyard to WrestleMania. I'm extremely proud of that. I've always been me. The last three weeks of my career, I've cut some of the best promos I've ever cut, and I do consider myself to be a promo guy. Winning the Heavyweight Title for the first time, when I cashed in on Edge, was awesome. The fact that I can work with anybody, from Undertaker to Big Show to Rey Mysterio.”

It's rarely been stated in public - and never on WWE programming - but one of Phil Brooks' biggest inspirations in WWE history is “Macho Man” Randy Savage, the former 2-time WWE champion who tragically passed away in May of 2011.

From CM Punk's signature apparel to his patented top-rope elbow smash, there are many similarities between Savage and Brooks, the most profound of which is neatly concealed from the camera lens.

Like Savage, Brooks is an all-or-nothing kind of man. When the time came for Randy Savage to step away from pro wrestling, he stayed away and never tarnished his legacy by returning for a string of comeback matches that would have exposed him to be older, out of shape, and incapable of performing at his former level of greatness.

Phil Brooks wants the same kind of exit. When he leaves WWE next time, it will be a permanent leave of absence. Save for hall of fame inductions or other prestigious occasions, don't look for Brooks to turn up doing color commentary or filling in the traditional legend's role.

He wants no part of it.

Phil Brooks will be the pro wrestling equivalent of television host Johnny Carson. When Carson left The Tonight Show in 1992 after an historic 30-year reign, he retired on top, never returning to host another program again. He faded away into an almost hermetic lifestyle, dodging cameras and the public whenever and wherever possible.

When Brooks finally chooses to dim the spotlight he now commands, he won't ever retrace his steps down the runway and toward the ring.

"For all of his on-air moaning and complaining about stuff," an industry source says, "it's easy to forget that there's probably no one in the business that loves wrestling more than Phil does. No one. He cares about his own legacy, yes, but he also cares about professional wrestling. And, to him, pro wrestling isn't just the WWE. He has a great sense of history and respect. He admires the men who have come before him and he cares deeply for the superstars who will follow. If CM Punk leaves this industry in better shape than it was before he got here, he will be able to retire happy and content. He could do that today if he wants to. So I'm cherishing the days we have left with him. I think they're numbered, and it's by his own choosing."

Perhaps what remains the biggest mystery surrounding Phil Brooks' future plans is what the straight edge superstar will do after retiring from active competition.

"There's no doubt among any of the boys in back that Phil is a guy who loves what he does," a source confesses. "You can't fake passion like that. Phil is happy when he is in the ring. And I don't really know how deep his happiness runs outside of it. All I know is that he has an excellent head on his shoulders. He is emotionally balanced. He's a strong, centered person."

According to individuals who have worked with Brooks for the better part of the last decade, Brooks has also been incredibly responsible with all aspects of his personal and financial lives. Unlike many current and former pro wrestlers, he hasn't been reckless with his earnings in the least. When the time comes to retire, he will be a wealthy enough man to live an extremely comfortable life for the rest of his days without ever having to work another minute.

But Brooks is the furthest thing from lazy. Growing old in a rocking chair isn't his cup of tea. But given the rumor that Brooks plans to leave wrestling altogether within the next 3 years or so, it is unclear where this man of many talents will concentrate his faculties.

"I don't think he wants to do color commentary," a source says, "which is really a shame because he is excellent in the broadcast booth. Having watched him call Raw several times a few years back, it's clear he could work with WWE for the rest of his life in some capacity and be a valuable if not indispensable asset every step of the way."

So, if the speculation is true and CM Punk leaves professional wrestling completely after 2015, where will he go?

Tragically for Brooks, his family life has been less than ideal. Not married, without children, and not speaking to his brother, Phil Brooks' personal life

took another sad - and public - turn in June of 2013 when the WWE superstar moved to obtain a restraining order against his own mother.

Sources close to the family matter told TMZ that Brooks' estranged mother "constantly hits him up for money and then threatens to kill herself if he doesn't come through."

Brooks claimed in legal documents filed in Illinois that he has attempted to cease communications with his mother since 2012 "due to repeated financial demands and years of abusive, harassing and threatening behavior."

"In the document," TMZ reported, "Punk says he's made an effort to help his mom -- who he claims suffers from bipolar disorder -- giving her more than \$100,000. But Punk says her 'abusive/threatening behavior' escalated when he cut her off."

Although details remain foggy at best, TMZ asserted that his own mother went as far as to threaten the release of "potentially embarrassing information about her son's past."

It is rumored that the information was pertinent to arrests dating back to his high school career.

"I wish for the harassment to stop and am requesting the assistance of the court in this regards," Brooks told the court, ultimately obtaining a two-year

restraining order against his mother.

Not all relationships have proven toxic for Brooks, however. Although he has been romantically linked to several women close to the professional wrestling industry, he is presently believed to still be in a long-term relationship with Amy Dumas, better known to WWE fans as "Lita."

Of course, in the big picture, Brooks doesn't particularly seem ready to settle down, especially when he is observed interacting with fans – fans he truly cares deeply about. Individuals close to the WWE superstar say Brooks has an astonishingly calm, patient, almost avuncular demeanor around younger fans who "inspire" the WWE icon to an extent perhaps most fail to understand.

"Phil is enormously gracious," a source reveals. "When his head is in the game - working out or about to have a match, that kind of thing - he doesn't want to be bothered for photographs and signatures. Perfectly understandable. He is a pro. And he's focused. But what you don't see in the press is the other side. When he meets fans on the street or at scheduled events - maybe ComicCon or something like that - he is sweet and accommodating to everyone. And you can tell he appreciates the respect and adulation the fans have for him. I don't know how he is going to let that go. When you're a guy like Shawn Michaels - happily married, good home

life, kids, etc. - you have reason to leave the business and can manage without the love these fans provide. You want to spend time with family. Unless Phil has a family in another three years, he is going to need something to put his passion and time into. We don't know what that is. Phil always operates with a plan, so maybe he has it all figured out. But he is sure as hell playing this one close to the chest. So if you want to know what comes next after WWE for CM Punk, honestly, I don't think anyone - except for Phil - has the answer to that one."